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# The right mood

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Fine and Applied Arts  
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

THE RIGHT MOOD

By

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For the criticism and encouragement he has administered during the last two years, I would like to thank my professor, Mr. Fred Meyer. I have learned many valuable lessons about my painting and myself under his direction.

To my Associate Advisers, Mr. Eric Bellman and Ms. Sheila Wells, I wish to express appreciation for their help.

Without the support of my family and friends the completion of this effort would not have been possible.

I here gratefully acknowledge them, especially my parents, brother and godmother. This thesis is dedicated to them.

Through this supportive documentation of my thesis work, I hope to verbally clarify the intentions mentioned in my proposal. Due to the subjective nature of abstract paintings, it is nearly impossible to conclusively prove a point. By referring to observations made by and about other artists and their work, I have been able to substantiate and complement my own ideas. I found evidence of what I interpreted to be the underlying attitude that is developed individually but shared collectively by artists. It seems this "shared attitude" has no geographic or time boundaries. It is remarkable to note parallels between the methods and thoughts involving ancient oriental art, as a whole, and those of particular modern artists.

As a result of researching, I have been able to compose more accurately with words, what I have known in my mind: namely, the mood I experience when painting effectively. I felt a strengthening in the validity that one proper artistic attitude exists when I discovered that the ideas of other artists reflect the essences of my thoughts. Along with some of the concerns of ancient oriental painters, I have chosen statements from several twentieth painters to help illustrate my impression of a proper frame of mind.

## Essay One

I have always admired oriental art, amazed by the delicate but enduring brushwork found in drawings, prints and glaze decoration. Its simple and expressive qualities have not been a deliberate influence on my paintings; I do not concentrate on oriental imagery as I work. However, something within my paintings must distill enough oriental flavor which cause many persons to remark on this characteristic. These comments always surprise me because I never realize this source of inspiration until the work is completed.

Oriental art is an extension of the way Eastern people live their lives. The Eastern culture is influenced by Zen, which began to flourish during the sixth century in China and eventually spread throughout surrounding areas. Zen encompasses thought, activity, nature, perception and much more, and is manifested in every facet of daily living. Just as Zen, in a cultural and religious sense, is a way of conducting and rationalizing one's being, it also has a basis for producing art. This basis is the Zen attitude or frame of mind which, although ancient in origin, has valid application for modern artists who work non-objectively.

In Zen there are seven characteristics of aesthetics which are thought of as goals. Each of equal importance, together creating a perfect whole. Although I do not subscribe to

Zen in a formal sense, and have not previously studied its doctrines, I find these principles to be pertinent to my attitude as I work. By painting non-objectively, I must strive for something harmonious on canvas in order to call it complete. Since I work rapidly while painting, my brain has a short time to process data governing my actions. In this state of mind I must necessarily be concerned with many factors simultaneously. These seven characteristics of Zen aesthetics portray elements which are subconscious considerations as I work. I shall briefly describe each because they are important not only in illustrating a cultural frame of mind, but an artistic attitude as well.

1. Asymmetry: not adhering to the kind of perfect form, which, by being symmetrical tends to make symmetry something ultimate.
2. Simplicity: being sparse, not cluttered. In color, being unobtrusive and avoiding diversity. The simplest color is black.
3. Austere Sublimity or Lofty Dryness: being advanced in years and life, being seasoned. Disappearance of unskillfulness, in art; a penetration to the essence by a master.



4. Naturalness: through the result of a full, creative intent that is devoid of anything artificial or strained. An intention that is so pure and so concentrated that nothing is forced.

5. Subtle Profundity or Deep Reserve: an implication rather than the naked exposure of the whole. Simple forms in which something infinite is contained. Also containing in paintings a calm darkness that pacifies the mind, in Zen art, a bright darkness.

6. Freedom from Attachment: not being bound to things such as habit, convention, custom, formula, rule. Being unconstrained in thinking and action.

7. Tranquility: quiet and calm, being inwardly oriented. Paintings permeate the mind with composure: "rest amid motion."<sup>1</sup>

These seven points, by their very nature, depict the concept I am trying to deliver in this thesis. The mind of each artist synthesizes an equivalent of the seven aesthetic characteristics in order to produce a state of mind conducive to creating effective art work. The seven components which constitute a single artist's mood correlate to causes of individual attitudes in fellow artists. In some way these components are shared collectively. I did not create these seven characteristics of

aesthetics, but find it startling that such ancient ideas contain meaning for me to grasp as I paint today in the western world.

I was intrigued by the philosophy behind a group of painters who were popular in Japan (Northern Sung Period 960-1127). The Ch'an artists adopted an ink style and carried it to an ultimate fulfillment. It is a free, spontaneous style with emphasis on sudden enlightenment. The artist, enthused by inspiration could complete his painting in a matter of minutes. Brief periods of highly concentrated activity were the main concern, as opposed to intricately executed details. The medium encouraged this approach, especially in the favorite spilled-ink paintings. Nothing could be revised once the brush strokes were placed; this clearly required a lot of skill and technique. If the work was to maintain the spiritual quality expressive in Zen, there could be no hesitation, uncertainty or reworking the painting.<sup>2</sup>

Possibly my subconscious absorbed the energies and convictions which were unfolded into any oriental art I have seen. I have not fashioned my methods of painting after the Ch'an artists because I did not actually know of them before now. I certainly have incorporated into my philosophy of painting, their free, spontaneous style with emphasis on activity rather than perfect details.

Their description of a sudden enlightenment which induced them to work intuitively is what I have been defining as a mood, or attitude that allows me to complete effective imagery.

At times, I experience great productive bursts of energy during which I am able to work well. This might be dubbed my "sudden enlightenment" because, I am then able to treat my equivalent of the seven characteristics of aesthetics with the proportions of importance each always deserves. I must now strive to cultivate and preserve these time-honored ingredients in my attitude as I paint.

So many centuries ago, the Eastern mind was able to identify, characterize and utilize the elements and practices which helped them achieve a perfect frame of mind. Without a conscious prior knowledge of these concepts, I have recently determined that my proper attitude for producing a good painting is derived from similar features. I also realize that the present is as important a learning tool as history. By working in a modern age, I am consequentially influenced by the artists of this century. Through the attitudes and sentiments conveyed in their statements, I have found encouragement and support. I doubt this sense of unity with other's ideas is peculiar to me as an artist. It can be interpreted

as a timeless thread of cohesion between the individual attitudes developed by all artists.

## Essay Two

It is my belief, by the very nature of an art piece, the intentions and attitudes of the maker are present in the work. They may seem blatant or obscure to the audience. Given some pertinent information about the work, even a title by the artist, is helpful in grasping the ideas behind it. At the same time, an artist should not divulge all secrets; part of art's appeal is the mystery it exudes. A sense of adventure in discovering the meaning or purpose of a painting intensifies its aesthetic qualities. Bearing this in mind, I will attempt to construct the individual attitudes of each artist by quoting from them, regarding their painting. The statements chosen represent clues, which determine the concerns contributing to the mood, or frame of mind, experienced by each but shared by all. These passages also reflect certain similarities with my perception of my own attitude while painting.

In 1950, Jackson Pollock described a state of mind he maintained as he executed his famous action paintings: "When I am in my painting, I am not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of "get acquainted" period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony,



an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well."<sup>3</sup>

Pollock's attitude can be likened to that of the Japanese painters who emphasize activity and spontaneity. The contact he speaks of with his paintings bears a spiritual quality. When I am in the proper mood for painting, like Pollock, I am not conscious of what I do until after the activity is completed. When I begin feeling self-conscious about my painting, the end product can be ruined, as when Pollock lost contact with his paintings.

As an artist whose work has been compared with Chinese calligraphy, Franz Kline, had something to offer as he spoke of the qualities he associated with his drawing-like paintings. Kline said he was conscious of particular paintings containing certain tones of feeling and emotion. "In other words, there's a particular static or heavy form that can have a look to it, an experience translated through the form; so then it does have a mood. And when that is there, well then it becomes--it becomes a painting."<sup>4</sup> For him, a piece was valid only if it contained this mood which transferred from the artist onto the canvas. The mood speaks of the culmination of the artist's life experiences as expressed through the action of painting.

In my paintings, one or many moods can be sensed. The viewer may or may not be persuaded to extract the same

substance from them I poured into my work. No matter what mood the paintings project or elicit, my body could only have performed the artistic task successfully under ideal mental conditions. I had to be in the right mood. How does any artist achieve this frame of mind? I think painter Larry Rivers described it accurately when he explained, "An artist is moved by himself and his anxiety about what he should do."<sup>5</sup>

Ideally, anxiety should prod us to continue and question in our work as artists. Some anxiety will do its duty by keeping us humble. Too much anxiety could cripple a creative mind; it is possibly through a subconscious knowledge of this that our attitude is influenced by an equivalent to the Zen concept of "Freedom from Attachment" (being unconstrained in thinking). The only formula to effectively produce a perfect balance in our attitude is known within our subconscious. Larry Rivers has identified the artist and his anxieties as factors in creative motivation. I believe there is truth in this, but we must learn to control the anxieties in order to produce the right effect in our attitudes. Hence, each individual artist holds the key to his own creative mood; others can explain and describe it for him, but he alone can summon it at the proper time.

Another artist I admire very much, Helen Frankenthaler, has made reference to a proper time and attitude by

articulating on her approach to art and painting. She says the themes of her Expressionist works are contained in her head, her life, vision and experience. Frankenthaler's approach is "in one sense, formed and a part of me, it doesn't have to be a regularized, limited, enforced attitude or program. It's built-in, so I can play with the attitude one way or another--let it come to me... One prepares, bringing all one's weight and gracefulness and knowledge to bear: spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, physically. And often there's a moment when all frequencies are right and it hits."<sup>6</sup>

The "hitting point" is when the proper timing produces the proper frame of mind while working on painting. Frankenthaler is describing a conglomeration of forces or "frequencies" which affect what is done on the canvas. I think the manner in which she operates is a version of the perfect creative frame of mind. Since Helen Frankenthaler's work is non-objective, all of these elements are interpreted into a mood in paint which, if successful, is sensed by the viewer. As I have stated before, this is of special importance to all non-objective artists, myself included.

With great respect toward Helen Frankenthaler, I truly admire her paintings for their rich sense of color in a harmonious and seemingly spontaneous composition. These are qualities I always strive for in my work; if any portion



becomes forced a painting will never be completely "right". Frankenthaler's own sentiments on all painting accurately sum up these artistic intentions: "that a really good picture looks as if it's happened all at once. It's an immediate image. For my own work, when a picture looks labored and over-worked and you can read it...there is something in it that has not got to do with beautiful art to me. I think very often it takes ten of those over-labored efforts to produce one really beautiful wrist motion that is synchronized with your head and heart, and you have it, therefore it looks as if it were born in a minute."<sup>7</sup> Depicted here is the necessary activity preceding the right mood, which allows an artist to hit all the "frequencies" just so.

"Usually I am on a work for a long stretch until a moment arrives when the air of the arbitrary vanishes and the paint falls into positions that feel destined."<sup>8</sup> In this statement, Philip Guston echos the notion that the subconscious combines and processes the creative messages received while painting. The ultimate result being a frame of mind which corresponds directly to the Zen concept of "Naturalness." Both abstract artists, Guston and Frankenthaler, reflect on intentions in their processes of painting which are pure and concentrated, without artificial, strained or forced results. Guston "knows" when the paint

is finally destined for a certain composition.

Although there are numerous artists whose statements are pertinent, I would like to present the perceptions of another remarkable American painter. Influenced by automatism, but with emphasis on conscious decision making, Robert Motherwell has produced several series of monumental sized paintings. His paintings begin as drawings, then develop further on the easel. In 1944, Motherwell wrote: "All my work consists of a dialectic between the conscious (straight lines, designed shapes, weighted colors, abstract language) and the unconscious (soft lines, obscure shapes, automatism) resolved into a synthesis which differs as a whole from either."<sup>9</sup> As in the seven characteristics of Zen aesthetics, his conscious and unconscious attitudes are described separately as elements but constitute a single entity.

One of the seven characteristics which appears to be of great importance in Motherwell's philosophy of his work and the Abstract Expressionist movement is "Simplicity." He states: "We modern artists have no generally accepted subject matter, no inherited iconography. But, to reinvent painting, its subject matter and its means is a task so difficult that one must reduce it to a very simple concept in order to paint for the sheer joy of painting, as simple as the Madonna was to many generations of painters."

Modern artists have been rewriting the language of imagery in art, and much of the subject matter is intangible. Simplicity is therefore essential in communicating thoughts and emotions to the public. If the term "Simplicity" is used in the context of Zen: being sparse and uncluttered as well as unobtrusive with colors, some of the basic features of a Motherwell painting have been described. He uses a tremendous amount of black in his work; black is the simplest color. Color may determine mood and vice versa. Because Motherwell's paintings are so minimal in color, he must form the right frame of mind in order to successfully choose and position so few elements on a massive picture plane, while retaining an appearance of freshness in application. I hold Robert Motherwell in high regard, for he has obtained an impression of "Lofty Dryness" in his work. In Zen thought, a penetration to the essence. Motherwell exhibits this "essence" of his presence and temperament on the canvas. As already stated, his proper frame of mind is accomplished by synthesizing parts of his conscious and unconscious creative self.

The attitudes of the artists I have chosen resemble my own in content and manifestation. The attitudes are rooted in our personality and expand into our creative forces. This thread of continuity supports my inclination

to believe all artists have a common frame of mind which may be expressed verbally and creatively. They know when all the conditions are conducive to an advantageous artistic outcome. It is realized first subconsciously, then almost simultaneously on a conscious level as a work of art is implemented.

### Essay Three

As an artist, I consider myself to be a creative inventor of objects, concepts, pictures and ideas. To observers some of these may appear valid, impossible, simple, beautiful, trite or whatever else they feel. Another could possibly imitate but not duplicate my work. By their very nature my art pieces are an extension of myself. They are unique and must come from the core of my artistic subconsciousness. My aesthetic attitude governs what I make, what I am dedicated to, and my preferences in art. Even when not producing, I feel an artist still interprets and relates to the world around him in a creative manner. This is what struck me about the oriental ideas which maintain that the seven characteristics of aesthetics apply to all aspects of one's life, not only art.

My attitude has been in the making longer than I have been painting. Like everyone's, it is a result of social conditioning begun in childhood by parents, schools, religions, neighbors, weather, customs and the like. As I have become an adult, my choice of higher education, independent experiences, readings and travels have further affected it. This determines the way in which I perceive and respond to data, including the creative. Each time I paint, I bring a slightly altered mood and personal insight to the canvas. This explains why my work has changed gradually over the years.



Everything experienced in life contributes to my process of creating art. As I have come to understand this, I am able to manipulate the substances which affect my mental process while working.

The physical processes involved with painting are also important in my work. The medium and tools I use are vehicles for solving creative problems in a spontaneous way. I am consciously aware of their limitations, possibilities and options of employing them to serve my purpose. Often, I allow the process of painting to shine through in the work by dripping paint and allowing the brush marks to be apparent. I feel untrue to the medium by covering up the actual process in paint, therefore denying its existence. This would be un-natural in Zen aesthetics and is in direct correlation with Jackson Pollock's thinking that a work has a life of its own, which should come through.

Perhaps I should comment on the reason why I paint non-objectively. It is not because I dislike or am unable to render realistic images, but rather that this method of painting brings forth some kind of energetic force in me. The paint as well as the process lead me into an almost altered state of mind where the paint seems to fall into place easily and correctly. I find a certain strength in painting abstractly that I do not encounter by creating

realistic compositions.

The sensation of "sudden enlightenment" as was described by the Ch'an artists, seems for me, to grow out of working directly on the canvas. As their style was free and spontaneous with inks, so mine strives to be in acrylics. In my case, a painting will come off successfully only if I have aligned my mental "frequencies" (as Helen Frankenthaler calls them) to produce the right mood.

I constantly strive to allow myself to be present within my work, no matter how obscure. I feel confident about a piece when it seems to flow willingly through my mind and body into the given medium. I suppose it is my collective unconscious at work, which guides the decisions made about my art that I cannot fully explain afterward. I feel it is valid to approach a problem in art with this spontaneity; it becomes complete with personal symbols. These personal symbols allow for broader interpretations in the mind of the viewer. Symbols can be illustrated by the mood in the painting, which is indicative of the mood of the artist.

Whenever I am confronted by another artist's work, I find myself pondering the thoughts and feelings manifested in the executed piece. In my opinion, art is without substance if it does not convey an inspiration or emotion, liberated from the artist. It matters very little if what is seen or realized by the viewer is exactly what was

purposely intended. Maybe what I think I see is that which was added to the picture by the artist's unconscious. If this is true, it could be agreed upon that there is some type of universal attitude that is retained in our being, although subconsciously.

Because of the expressionistic nature of my paintings, I can easily understand the notion of "being in a painting" while working, as described by Pollock. Artists must be themselves in their paintings, as opposed to imitators. Subconscious and unconscious moods and intents must be allowed to permeate our work. When others look at my paintings and recount what they see I am always interested. I wonder if somehow, deep down, I knew that image would be projected to others through certain combinations of elements on canvas. It could be that my mind saw something which escaped my eyes as the painting emerged. Even when a piece is non-objective, as is my body of work, and does not represent a specific thing, the feeling exuded by it can be universal. Emotions and sensations, which constitute moods, are universal attitudes which can cross any timeline or national boundary.

This inquiry into the moods and attitudes embraced by modern artists as well as those from another time and place has enriched and strengthened my own. The production of art work has allowed all artists to experience numerous



proud, but, also, forced them to endure many conflicting moments. One of the best ways to confirm the validity of our creative frame of mind is by consulting those who have successfully gone before us in the art world.

My work in painting began at the point where I picked up on the art work of others. Artists who produced creations before me left clues as to what was important in paint. Where I should begin my investigation into new versions of old concepts. It is a slow process combining my attitudes with others' years of pursuit in the field. Hopefully, my endeavors will always bear the timeless lessons of the aesthetics of Zen as I attempt to maintain the singular proper frame of mind amid the ever emerging modern world.

## MOOD ABSTRACTION SERIES: 1-8





















## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, Zen and the Fine Arts, (Palo Alto: Japan and Kodansh International/USA, 1971), p. 28-37.

<sup>2</sup>Hugo Munsterberg, Zen & Oriental Art, (Rutland: Charles Tuttle Company, 1965), p. 29-37

<sup>3</sup>Helen H. Johnson, ed., American Artists on Art From 1940 to 1980, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>5</sup>Dorothy C. Miller, ed., 12 Americans, (Hartford: Connecticut Printers, Inc., 1956), p. 84.

<sup>6</sup>Helen Frankenthaler Prints: 1961-1979., (Williams College, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), p. 19

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>8</sup>Dorothy C. Miller, ed., 12 Americans, (Hartford: Connecticut Printers, Inc., 1956), p. 36

<sup>9</sup>Constance Schwartz, The Abstract Expressionists and Their Precursors, (Nassau County Museum of Fine Arts, 1981), p. 56.

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